

# The Clipper Visits Sweetser's

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Photos by Deni Johnson

In these space-age days of computerized mechanizations and high technological automation, Sweetser's General Store seems terribly old-fashioned. And don't you just love it that way?



Sweetser's General Store on Washington St.

"People hate changes," said Philip Nectow, owner of Sweetser's for the past 4 years. "It took me a long time when we bought Sweetser's to convince customers that we were not going to modernize the store, that we loved it just the way it was. Sweetser's is a Duxbury institution dating back to the 1800s. We want to preserve it just the way it is for its uniqueness, its quaintness. Our customers are our friends. They shop here 2 or 3 times a week. They know exactly where everything is in the store and woe be it if we try to move things around. We'll hear about it!"

"You should have heard the comments when we decided to put the bakery in the corner. 'What do you need a bakery for?' asked with a scowl." (Is there a soul who can walk into Sweetser's without breathing in deeply, letting that wondrous home-baked smell permeate every inch of his being? It's worth going in for the smell alone, for goodness sake!) The scowls disappeared and the bakery corner, homey and old-fashioned as you can get nowadays, further exemplifies the warm, friendly atmosphere that helps make Sweetser's what it is.

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Time changes many things. Not Sweetser's store, happily, but some of the behind-the-scenes operations of it have undergone changes. For instance, the upstairs storage areas were once packed full of stock, ready to be moved downstairs as needed. But the economy changed, as we're well aware, and about a year ago, it no longer made sense economically to keep well stocked ahead. The store began stocking goods from week to week on the basis of need. They began clearing out the storage area until now there are only scattered cartons of goods, and shelves only partially filled with stock. There are 2 small offices upstairs and then an incredible amount of unused space -- about 6,000 square feet, not even counting the area on the 3rd floor.

When you think of Sweetser's prime location on Duxbury Bay in Snug Harbor, and you think of the potential of that wasted upstairs space, you might understand why exciting ideas began bouncing about the rafters. How could this wasted space best be utilized? It seems to go on and on, from one room to another, for at one time many years ago the building contained apartments over the store. (Talk about old-fashioned -- you should see the grandma-style wallpapers and kitchen linoleums!) The "apart-



## *Business and industry*

ments" are in bad disrepair, with holes in the walls and fixtures removed, but with imagination you could picture what it might have been like several generations back.

When Nectow took over the business, he sifted through all that was left behind in the unused upstairs, found letters dating back to the Civil War and donated them to the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society. Originally, the building housed the store, which sold everything imaginable, and a home above it. The first owner was William Sprague from England and the entire area was known as "Sprague's Neck." In later years, apartments were made in the upstairs front of the building and the store owner's living quarters were moved to the back. But then, the history of the building is an entire story in itself.

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As "exciting plans" (in lieu of the threatening word "changes") are discussed about the unused upstairs, certain key requirements have been constantly kept in mind. First, the Sweetser building is in the process of being named a historical site, which means that no architectural changes can be made to the outside of the building. Secondly, regardless of what might be happening in the rafters, the store would remain unchanged. Yet wondering where to begin in this huge expanse became mind-boggling.

One idea led to another and soon Nectow found himself on the phone with a friend, Greg Fossella, an industrial engineer who had graduated from, and is on the board of directors of, the Rhode Island School of Design. Phil discussed with him the idea of renovating the upstairs as a class project to be done by the school's students. Several representatives from the school arrived one spring day, poked into the nooks and crannies, and "went bananas when they saw the giant wooden pulley in the attic, once used for hauling hay into the storage area," said Nectow.

In June he received the following letter:

"We enjoyed meeting with you and discussing the possibility of your sponsorship of a design project for the Rhode Island School of Design interior architecture students. We enthusiastically accept the challenge and have titled the project, 'Sweetser's General Store Development for Historic Snug Harbor: Duxbury, Massachusetts.'

"The project seems to satisfy many requirements important to us for educational purposes. It has the historic aspect which will require research and design sensitivity related to the site and its context; it must consider view, orientation to sun, ocean and winds; it must consider access and circulation, volumetric space divisions, and the detail of color, material, and finishes. Most important, it must attend to functional concerns and explore the best use of the space (residential or commercial, or a combination). Lastly, the students will be working with a *real client*

whose motivations are practical and economical as well as aesthetic.

"We look forward to working with you in the Fall."

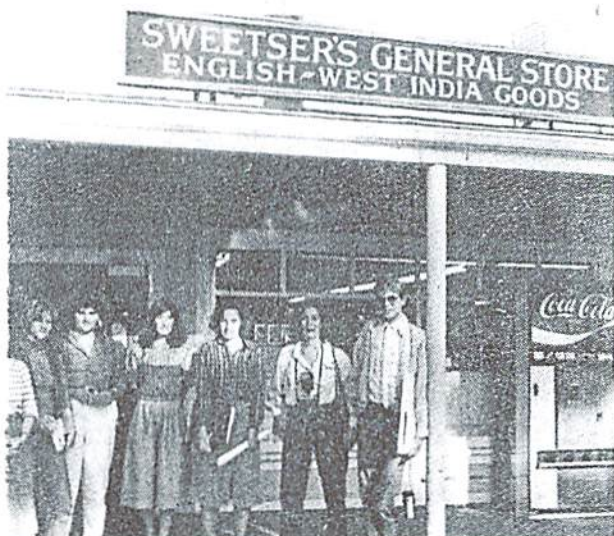
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Last Friday a class of interior architecture students and their instructor, Dian Bauer, head of the interior architecture department, arrived at Sweetser's to see the "before" and imagine the "after." They poked and measured and scribbled in notebooks, excited to participate in a "real-live" project and contemplate the best utilization of the space -- apartments, offices, conference rooms, a small library, or various combinations. Sweetser's prepared lunch for the class and planned tours of historical sites in the area to give them a taste of New England history and architecture as a broader background for the Sweetser's project. Nectow offered his Marshfield home so the class could stay overnight, to continue their sightseeing and discussions about the project on Saturday.

The biggest problem facing the project is the septic system. Nectow has been in touch with the building inspector and the board of health and is working through the state for the most modern, up-to-date system which could be used for the building without

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Section 2 Thursday, September 23, 1982



R.I. School of Design students in front of Sweetser's General Store, l-r, Bruce Long of Pittsburgh, Antoinette Breed of Providence, Janice Carroll of Centerville, Diane Bauer, professor from Providence, Joyce Minassian of Providence, Heather Pafka of Washington, D.C., and Tina Grimes of Chicago.

causing any problem. "And it could take 10 years before it all comes together," said Nectow. "So much is unknown right now."

Marion Boli, Nectow's secretary, suggested an idea which is feasible within a short time, "possibly within the year." The back area of the upstairs could be made into a "condominium-ized" office, a new idea whereby a partitioned desk area could be rented in an open office. A secretary, an answering service and other clerical services would be shared, cutting costs for each participant. "Marion would like the office in the back so she can have an ocean view," Nectow said as he pointed to the solid walls facing the bay. As lavatory facilities already exist, this part of the project could begin without altering the present septic system.

In exchange for the architectural designs which the students will submit at the end of the year's project, Nectow will present a grant to the school, a Sweetser's scholarship.

"At the end of the project, I plan on letting our Sweetser's customers participate in some way with the final decision. If the students offer 3 designs, for example, maybe we'll have a contest and let the customers vote for their favorite choice. At any rate,

I want our customers to have a say in the final choice. And then we'll have a tour, an open house, for the customers when the project is completed. It's important to us that they feel a part of what is happening here."

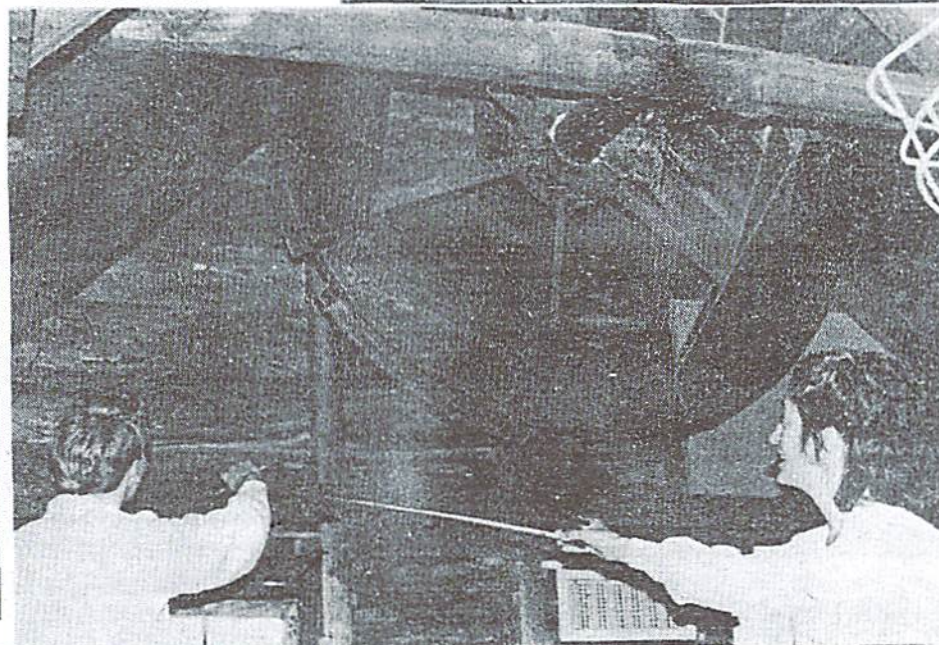
Redesigning the empty, unused area of one of Duxbury's most prominent historical buildings will certainly be a challenging project for these college students, as those neglected, cobwebbed corners await their transformation.





R.I. School of Design students do some planning above Sweetser's after their day's work.

Right: Joyce Minassian and Heather Pafka taking outdoor measurements.



Bruce Long and Antoinette Breed measure the 3rd floor area by the grain-hauling wheel.